

Expanding the role of a Company Commander in a COIN environment

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# **Expanding the role of a Company Commander in a COIN environment**

## **Introduction**

Counterinsurgency operations (COIN) require leaders to be "pentathletes": warfighters, info gatherers, infrastructure builders, humanitarians. This is the reason for which the current manifestation of counterinsurgency (COIN) warfighting is a combination of military, intelligence, and government agencies. In Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, maneuver units, special operations forces, civil affairs specialists, psychological operations detachments, international development agencies, and intelligence and advisory elements all operate simultaneously along the same lines without synchronizing effects among parallel units or commands. In a COIN environment, in order to obtain support among the population and build trust the company commander must expand his role beyond the military to include civilian operations.

In violation of a basic COIN principle, this independence leaves no one person or unit completely responsible for COIN operations in a given community.

## **The COIN environment**

The first new aspect is the explosion in the number of actors present in today's irregular warfare battlespace. The COIN environment can be defined as a mosaic of players, participants, and spoilers. The presence of the United Nations and myriad regional relief agencies, coalition partners, private security forces, media entities, and commercial contractors make counterinsurgency planning and execution increasingly more difficult.

The operational battlespace is made more chaotic in terms of urban settings by foreign "human terrain" and competing interest groups. Some experts argue that the operational space can be simplified through the use of common concepts and "licensing" participation by various parties.<sup>1</sup> As a result defining the character of the opponent and assessing his strategy, structure, and means is extremely difficult.

Finally among these actors a special category, the local civilian population, presents a unique challenge.

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<sup>1</sup> John MacKinlay, *Defeating Complex Insurgency: Beyond Iraq and Afghanistan* (London, Eng.: RUSI, Whitehall Paper 64, 2005), pp. 57-58.

### Obtaining support

"In the battlefield, popular perceptions and rumor are more important than a hundred tanks."<sup>2</sup> Presently, insurgencies are defined as a violent clash between a state and a rival political group to control a population or institute an alternative political order. These groups may seek to paralyze and fragment the state, rather than gain control of its apparatus and govern.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the fight for the population's support may not be direct. Since the insurgent does not require food or arms from the population, this will be true in some cases, in others will not, and his limited goal is to destabilize not create an alternative political order, he may not require the popular support of the people. In this case what objective can be worth enough for insurgency if the insurgent is not seeking right to rule or govern the populace? The answer can be discovered easy in new religious ideology insurgencies where the insurgent may not seek to do or achieve any practical objective, but rather to be a religious fighter trying to expel foreigners.

On the other hand, the main objective of the counterinsurgent force is to gain the popular support of the

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<sup>2</sup> David Kilcullen, "Twenty Eight Articles: Fundamentals of Company-level Counterinsurgency," *Military Review*, 86 (May-June 2006), 106.

<sup>3</sup> David Kilcullen, "Counter-insurgency Redux," *Survival*, 48 (Winter 2006-07), p. 112.

people because the population is the key to success in a counterinsurgency. For the counterinsurgent, all energies should be directed at gaining and maintaining control over the population and obtaining its support.

*Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, a 1964 book written by David Galula, based on his firsthand knowledge of insurgencies in China, Greece, Southeast Asia, and Algeria, derives numerous lessons, several of which reflect current experiences. The first lesson is that successful COIN operations call for assistance from the community. To earn such support, the counterinsurgent must sell the host-nation population on an idea. As Galula writes, "[O]n the eve of embarking on a major effort, the counterinsurgent faces what is probably the most difficult problem of the war: He has to arm himself with a competing cause."<sup>4</sup>

Galula's second lesson is that a static unit with responsibility for a specific area of responsibility (AOR) is preferable to a mobile unit moving from area to area. While military planners like to task organize and shift boundaries, these behaviors are hostile to effective COIN.

As Galula writes:

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<sup>4</sup> David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964, reprinted 2005), 101.

The static units are obviously those that know best the local situation, the population, the local problems; if a mistake is made, they are the ones who will bear the consequences. It follows that when a mobile unit is sent to operate temporarily in an area, it must come under the territorial command, even if the military commander of the area is the junior officer. In the same way as the U.S. ambassador is the boss of every U.S. organization operating in the country to which he is accredited, the territorial military commander must be the boss of all military forces operating in his area.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore as Galula suggests, "[u]nits must be deployed where the population actually lives and not on positions deemed to possess a military value."<sup>6</sup> For the local people to feel secure and provide intelligence, they must have 24-hour access to the counterinsurgent force. Units with control over an AOR should live in that neighborhood. The counterinsurgent force projects power through its proximity to the community. Integration with the community creates obvious benefits for intelligence collection, information operations, reconstruction, and improved community relations.

### **Building trust**

Entirely winning the hearts and minds is an unachievable end state; however, counterinsurgents battle for support of the populace. Mobilizing the populace is a subset of "hearts and minds" activities. Hearts and minds are two distinct but related areas of perception management, as follows:

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<sup>5</sup> Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, 93.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. , 111

- The "hearts" dimension seeks to persuade the populace that their interests are best served by the COIN force's success.
- The "minds" dimension seeks to persuade the populace that the COIN force is going to succeed in its mission. This helps convince wavering community leaders to join the winning side and deters those who might otherwise support the insurgents.<sup>7</sup>

One of the greatest challenges in COIN is to identify those pockets of the population that indirectly or clandestinely provide support to the insurgency. Winning over the population denies the insurgents their base of support. To accomplish this, the counterinsurgent must get sufficient cultural intelligence to gain rapport, trust, and credibility as an ally of the host nation. Cultural missteps damage the relationship with the host nation and the people. The people have to believe that the government can fulfill their needs and respond to their personal interests.

#### **Expanding the Company Commander role**

"The infantry rifle company is organized and equipped to close with the enemy to kill him, destroy his equipment, and

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<sup>7</sup> Small unit leaders' guide for counterinsurgency (Washington: Department of the Navy, June 2006), 31



shatter his will to resist.”<sup>8</sup> This is the primary purpose of an infantry company in war, but in a COIN environment accomplishing all these can mean failure. “Essential though it is, the military action is secondary to the political one, its primary purpose being to afford the political power enough freedom to work safely with the population.”<sup>9</sup> Military operations will create temporary breathing space, but long-term development and stabilization by civilian agencies will ultimately win the war. Successful COIN campaigns are the product of various lines of operations.

For example, a soldier who trains local security forces will understand the culture better, which should guide him when he conducts combat patrols. A commander who attends city council meetings to support reconstruction projects shapes the battlefield for security operations. The unit responsible for coordinating with the local security forces also manages their recruiting and training. Conducting security operations, promoting economic development, training indigenous security forces, and fostering political institutions work together collectively to deny the insurgent access to the population.

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<sup>8</sup> FM 7-10 The Infantry Rifle Company (Washington: DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY , 31 October 2000, Chapter 1, Introduction, Section I. Preparation For War

<sup>9</sup>Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, 93.

## Counterarguments

Traditionalists and today's military planners would say that the actual way to conduct COIN is the best one. For each battalion deployed in theater they have assigned an area of operations and the battalion commander is responsible for it. How many battalions can afford a nation or even a coalition in order to fully cover the entire area of operations? To answer this question one has to consider many factors.

Not everyone agrees the above point of view. As Galula says in his book Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice "the basic unit of COIN warfare is the largest unit whose leader is in direct and continuous contact with the population."<sup>10</sup> Obviously the unit is a company or similar unit and the leader is the company commander. Giving the company commander all necessary means that he or she requires to better control his or hers area of operations and the local leaders can be the solution to the new insurgency.

Everyone agrees that almost everything in counterinsurgency is interagency. And everything important - from policing to intelligence to civil-military operations to trash collection - will involve a company working with civilian actors and local

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<sup>10</sup> Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, 110-111

indigenous partners who cannot be controlled, but whose success is essential.<sup>11</sup>

This is the purpose for which, in order to be successful in COIN environment, troop commanders especially at the company level must be able to manage the simultaneous outcomes of small-unit actions, intelligence collection, and humanitarian assistance missions.

### **Conclusion**

As General David Petraeus said, "a leader's most important task is to set the right tone"<sup>12</sup>. Consequently the company commander's role in a COIN environment becomes more important. Leaders must embrace the themes of COIN even if they do not fully understand it, then their lower-level leaders can drive the fight.

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<sup>11</sup> David Kilcullen, *Twenty-Eight Articles -Counterinsurgency*

<sup>12</sup> Lieutenant General David A. Petraeus, "Learning Counterinsurgency: Observations from Soldiering in Iraq," *Military Review* (January-February 2006): 9.

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